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REVIEW BASED JOURNAL ARTICLE**MUSEUMS: PSYCHOLOGY OF FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION**

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Author's Information

Vanda Vitali is an international museum executive. She held various museum positions in Canada, US, New Zealand and France. Among the most recent are: Chief Executive of the Canadian Museum Association, Ottawa, Canada; Director and Chief Executive, Auckland Museum, Auckland, New Zealand; Vice President, public programs and Director, content development, Natural History Museum, Los Angeles, USA. By training, Vanda is a physicist and an art historian. The focus of her current work is on reconciliation in museum practice.

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Abstract

Western museums have been re-examining their practices and adjusting their ethical stands, often in response to having benefitted from colonial exploits or other such actions, in acquiring artifacts for their collections. The goal of this paper is to investigate how a bi-disciplinary perspective integrating museum practice with psychological theory and research about forgiveness might contribute to museum processes designed to mitigate and heal the impacts of diverse forms of cultural conflict. First, western museums' practices are examined that have contributed to reconciliation between the minority groups and the dominant culture. Reconciliation is examined within the context of repatriation of heritage objects and broader museum contributions to social justice. Next, the psychology of forgiveness is reviewed and how it can mitigate the impacts of traumatic inter-group conflict. Finally, proposals are offered by which western museums might utilize forgiveness to enhance inter-group reconciliation.

Keywords

Museums, Repatriation, Social Justice, Intergroup Forgiveness, Reconciliation

Museums and Reconciliation Practice

As societies evolve, their institutions evolve. Museums are no exception. Many museums in western culture acquired world-wide collections of artifacts during the colonial era through practices roundly condemned today. Over the past several decades, western museums have been developing more rigorous professional practices and have shown greater accountability towards their communities and their funders.

Reconciliation is the process of restoring harmony, understanding, or agreement between parties that have experienced conflict or historical grievances [1, 2]. Reconciliation requires a complex exploratory and explanatory dialogical process in which historical truth is revisited to include the voices of victim communities; the harms and impacts of transgressions are re-inventoried; apology may be extended to victim groups; offenders identify and renounce the attitudes which allowed for transgressions; the values and boundaries which were transgressed are reaffirmed, and victims may acknowledge the possibility for forgiveness. The dialogical process of reconciliation is underpinned by multiple and sometimes competing issues: security, justice, power, identity, belonging, truth, and meaning; needs for status, respect, moral integrity, belonging and identity [3, 4]. In brief, reconciliation between groups is a complex and invariably challenging process.

Repatriation

Repatriation of cultural artifacts is a broad international museum practice to repair injustices, heal the harmful effects of colonialism on victim groups and cultures, and open a dialogue allowing for reconciliation between victim and offending survivor cultures. Museum practice of repatriation is well-established as an essential step towards restoring justice and healing the adverse effects of colonialism and wars. See for instance UNESCO and Museum of London [5], New

Zealand's Te Papa Museum repatriation guide [6], the Indigenous Repatriation Handbook by the Royal British Columbia Museum [7] or repatriation of looted artworks during the Nazi era (The JUST Act Report: Germany [8]).

Repatriation efforts may occur between nations (for example, France, Benin, and Senegal [9]), or between individual museums and source communities (for example, Royal Ontario Museum [10]). Museums have also responded to support of the work of national and international agencies, for instance the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples [11], or The National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation [12] in Canada focused on the impact of involuntary placement of indigenous peoples into residential schools. An overarching goal of the Canadian Commission was to promote reconciliation between the victim tribes and the majority culture. Meloche [13] notes that repatriation directly contributes to the actions necessary for reconciliation identified by the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission: 1) truth-finding; 2) reparations; 3) building relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous people; and 4) acknowledging rights and title. The commission concluded its work in 2015 and issued 94 calls for action including specific recommendations for the Canadian Museum Association.

Repatriation efforts are faced with multiple complexities and challenges: legal specificities, conflicting national laws, concerns over the preservation and security of artifacts, provenance research and determination, etc., but the practice is fully accepted, and the professional community is engaged in developing manuals and guidebooks (see Lohman [14]; Lohman [15]).

Return of human remains [16], cultural artifacts, eco-facts, or works of art and other items of cultural significance to their rightful claimants is a practice with social justice implications more broad and profound than merely "being fair."

Repatriation not only acknowledges injustices but also serves to restore cultural identity and dignity to source communities. Repatriation serves reconciliation by demonstrating that errant historical practices are repudiated by museums and the cultures in which they are embedded. Museum repatriation practices can support fact finding, correct historical narratives, and demonstrate commitment to assuming responsibility for past misdeeds and taking corrective actions, elements essential to reconciliation.

Social justice

An even more complex journey is from repatriation to social justice. Social justice includes retributive and reparative justice. This broad approach to social justice is multifaceted and requires that museums not only confront their past but also adopt more equitable and inclusive practices for the future. Museums have risen to that challenge more and more. A series of case studies outlining a range of ways museums can and have engaged with complex ideas about identity, diversity and change within ethnographic museums, historic sites and art galleries was reported almost two decades ago [17]. Today, new departments and curatorial positions are being established to allow indigenous and minority group methods to enrich the museum practice. Collection management is equally enriched, including indigenous practices and knowledge. Exhibitions and programs are being developed that educate and foster understandings. Museum boards and advisory committees fostering inclusivity are today a part of museum practice (see for instance Morrisey, K. [18]).

The Empathetic Museum [19] arose as a critique of museums' reluctance to engage with social issues affecting communities, especially those of color. The Maturity Model was developed as a tool for guiding empathic museum practice.

Social justice extends far beyond the boundaries of the museum proper. Promotion of equitable partnerships, supporting cultural revitalization programs, addressing socio-economic disparities faced by source communities, etc. all require broader social input than what museums alone can and are able to do.

In spite of enormous efforts that museums have been investing into the processes of bridging diversity inequalities that would lead to reconciliation, these processes are slow. All institutional change requires much greater time than one would wish. But, regardless of the slowness of these processes, there are many positive outcomes. There is, however, little literature that acknowledges progress in reconciliation. So, how are we to understand this?

In the next sections we examine how knowledge of the psychology of reconciliation and related notions of transgression and forgiveness, contribute to societal and museum progress towards the elusive goal of reconciliation.

Psychology of Forgiveness

Forgiveness is an engine of restorative justice and reconciliation. The purpose of forgiveness is to help overcome anger, resentment, fear, and avoidance behavior towards the wrongdoer following unjust transgression of physical, psychological, and moral boundaries [20].

Transgressions

Substantive transgressions violate an individual's or group's physical, psychological, and moral boundaries resulting in deeply felt harm across multiple dimensions. Research with a wide range of individuals and victim groups has identified predictable cognitive, emotional, and behavioral consequences of being transgressed [21]. Characteristic negative cognitions include stereotyping of the offender, rumination about the injustice of the

offense, and blameful attributions about what happened and why. Negative emotions include anger, resentment, bitterness, hostility, and hatred. Negative behaviors including avoidance of the perpetrator, holding a grudge, vengeance seeking, and demands for atonement or retribution [22]. The impacts of transgressions can be brief or coalesce into enduring unforgiveness - angry rumination, resentment, bitterness, relationship avoidance, and anxiety over being hurt or offended again [23-25]. Forgiveness can reduce unforgiveness and provide a basis for reconciliation of relationships.

A substantial body of psychological research has established how the process of forgiveness can contribute to reconciliation [22]. Reconciliation is possible without forgiveness, and vice versa. But “Reconciliation without forgiveness is often no more than an armed truce in which each side patrols the demilitarized zone looking for incursions by the other and waiting to resume hostilities” [20]. Some degree of forgiveness, or letting go of fear and anger, would seem to be a precondition for meaningful reconciliation [26].

What Is Forgiveness?

Since the dawn of human civilization forgiveness has been a foundational practice for remedying the adverse effects of unjust interpersonal and inter-group transgressions [27, 28], and maintaining cultural membership and harmony [29]. Forgiveness has been used to relieve victims of political atrocities from corrosive resentment, bitterness, and associated mental health problems [30].

Many misconceptions exist about what forgiveness is. For example, forgiveness is not: condoning, forgetting, denying, granting amnesty or pardon, resignation, or overlooking [31]. Forgiveness exists as a dispositional trait [32, 33], a process [20, 34, 35], an end state (being forgiven), self-forgiveness [36]. Early studies of

forgiveness focused on forgiveness as a process of intrapsychic change. In the surge of research interest in forgiveness since 2000, the study of forgiveness has been extended to include close relationships [37], intergroup forgiveness [38], organizations [39] and peacemaking [4].

The American Psychological Association's Dictionary of Psychology [40] describes forgiveness as "Willfully putting aside feelings of resentment toward someone who has committed a wrong, been unfair or hurtful, or otherwise harmed you in some way. Forgiveness is not merely accepting what happened or ceasing to be angry. Rather, it involves a voluntary transformation of your feelings, attitudes, and behavior, so that you are no longer dominated by resentment and can express compassion, generosity, or the like toward the person who wronged you."

Among psychological researchers, forgiveness is seen as having two primary components: a) the reduction in vengeful and angry thoughts, feelings, and motives that may be accompanied by (b) an increase in some form of positive thoughts, feelings, and motives toward the offending person [41, 42].

There is broad consensus among experts that forgiveness is a difficult process which occurs over time, often slowly, requiring sustained effort, one person at a time. Progress towards forgiveness is not linear, it is achieved in fits-and-starts. Forgiveness is often partial rather than complete. Even when forgiveness is fully offered, inter-group harmony may be elusive. John-Paul Lederach [43] a highly regarded international peace scholar, notes that reconciliation occurs at the intersection of truth, justice, mercy (forgiveness) and peace, and that the relationship among truth, justice, forgiveness, and peace can be strained. Might the pursuit of truth and justice be truncated by forgiveness? Might harshness in pursuit of truth and application of justice forestall forgiveness and peace?

However, when successful, forgiveness can seem mystical in its ability to restore peace, personal freedom, and agency.

Though forgiveness may be a slow and difficult process, a robust body of scientific research has demonstrated the effectiveness of forgiveness therapy in ameliorating the adverse impacts transgressions on individual, interpersonal, and inter-group health and well-being [35, 41, 44] across a spectrum of problems, populations, and cultures [45]. The effectiveness of forgiveness interventions is related to utilization of a structured approach to forgiveness more than a specific intervention model, and the amount of time an intervention focuses on forgiveness [41, 46]. Elements shared among empirically-supported forgiveness models include: close examination of the history and broad impact of transgressions on victims; identification of psychological injuries to victims; offenders accepting responsibility and expressing remorse for wrongdoing; education about the components and benefits of psychological forgiveness; making an explicit commitment to engaging the process of forgiveness and reducing anger towards offenders; and, gradually replacing negative emotions towards offenders with compassion, and positive regard. More than 150 studies have examined the relationship between forgiveness and physical and mental health, and more than 70 clinical studies have reported on the efficacy of forgiveness interventions.

Intergroup Forgiveness

Repatriation redresses intergroup transgressions. Intergroup forgiveness involves cultural, political, or social groups transforming their internal motivation, cognition, emotions, and behaviors towards one another following group, state, and national unwarranted violations.

Van Tongeren [38, 47] reported on meta-analysis of 64 studies of intergroup forgiveness involving conflicts in more than 20 countries. The data indicated nine primary factors of intergroup forgiveness. Affective factors: 1) Empathic emotions towards the perpetrator; 2) negative emotions (e.g., anger, fear) towards the perpetrator; 3) indications of collective guilt; Cognitive factors: 4) trust; 5) perceived victimhood; 6) amends; Constraints: 7) strong ingroup identification; 8) common, superordinate group identification; 9) contact with the offending group.

Wenzel [4] identified issues which contribute to the complex dynamics of intergroup dialogue forgiveness and reconciliation. When transgressions disempower and humiliate group punishment (retributive justice) of the offender is typically desired, whereas when transgressions violate community norms and values, affirmation of foundational cultural values and practices is desired (restorative justice). Reconciliation may require both punitive reparations and affirmation of values. When the offender and respondent lack a common identity there is a "functional antagonism" [48]; they are more likely to perceive each other as not trustworthy or accountable. However, participants can identify both with their originating groups and groups to which they both belong (the museum community; a democratic nation). Mistaken ideas about the psychological process of forgiveness can obstruct intergroup reconciliation. So can differences in harm appraisal by victims and offenders; stereotyping and prejudice; staunch investment in group identity; competitive striving for power and status; and historical distance from the wrongdoings. Offenders' willingness to accept responsibility and express remorse affect the process of reconciliation as does victims' willingness to forgive.

Museum Pathways for Promoting Forgiveness and Reconciliation

Forgiveness is substantially an emotional process. Over the past two decades, museums have been developing exhibitions and programs that involve emotional engagement [49-51], to provide visitors with multiple points of entry into the subject matter and thus expand the range of learning and enjoyment of the exhibitions. Museums have also offered programs, lectures, and debates which provoke emotional reactions.

Conflict site-museums and memorial sites by their nature and the nature of their exhibitions and programs engage emotions. Carbone [52] advocates for explicit utilization of a forgiveness model by war-related museums to advance peace narratives. However, when it comes to war and genocide remembrance, some question the ability of heritage to balance open and inclusive dialogue for healing (See for instance Daly, P. [53]).

A principal process by which museums can promote forgiveness, reconciliation, and restorative justice might be dialogue with affected parties striving for consensus on harm done, responsibilities, corrective practices, and affirmation of the identity-sharing values and principles that may have been violated. This is attributed to the fact that public at large recognizes museums as trustworthy, authentic, and credible. The positive results of exploring relationships between past and present and engaging people meaningfully about the future are reported in the museum literature (See for instance Black [54]).

We would argue that participants with a working knowledge of the psychology of forgiveness and reconciliation might better foster constructive dialogue, and museums may need to engage trainers to provide guidance and education to dialogical participants. For example, with a focus on forgiveness, participants may understand more clearly the value and dynamics of remembrance narratives which strive for truth but avoid retaliation; acknowledgment of

responsibility and expression of remorse; reparation, repair, and prevention projects; and contact between offender and victim groups which might reflect progress towards restored harmony. Additionally, research has demonstrated that both sides sharing personal stories of loss and suffering elicit empathy and establishes emotional connection which is at the heart of victim-perpetrator dialogue (ref. Gobodo-Madikizela [55]). Forgiveness-oriented dialogues can draw on the benefits of forgiveness and the consequences of unforgiveness richly illustrated in literature, movies, religion, and the arts. Redemption stories about individual and group transformation from wrongdoing to exemplars of consensus values can also be helpful.

Museums undertaking reconciliation, and related actions, need to implement evidence-based assessment of the effectiveness of their programs and develop procedures for better reporting and documenting the impacts of their repatriation and reconciliation efforts.

Efforts to promote intergroup forgiveness and reconciliation are more likely to be effective if they are seen as endorsed by and reflecting the will or sentiments of the victim group and offender group as a whole. Hence, museums should convene broad group conversations.

One of the most important forgiveness and reconciliation contributions museums can make is to develop exhibitions and programs which promote a superordinate group identity, transforming past frozen identities towards new intergroup dynamics, expectations, and norms. Reservations about developing superordinate identities for a fear of losing minority identities need to be balanced against the long-term benefits of social cohesion for a functional society. Museums have a long history in promoting identities. Extending this practice through forgiveness could result in visions and imaginings of a positive and peaceful future, within themselves, and more broadly, giving hope to communities and society at large.

Conclusion

Museums in the west have been involved in and contributing to repatriation, retribution, reconciliation efforts and to right past social injustices. The time has come for museums to utilize the knowledge of forgiveness practices developed in the social sciences.

Forgiveness after violent and extended conflicts is challenging not only because of the scale of the harm and hurt, but also because the intergroup nature of conflict and the form of forgiveness it would require. Forgiveness can have a significant function of reconciliations, by disrupting a spiral of violence, contributing to a sense of justice, satisfying psychological need for status and power and identity/belonging, reducing defensiveness and encouraging mutual trust. However, it is critical to understand forgiveness not as an endpoint but rather as a process of working through with both parties sharing in the process toward shared truth, memory, emotions, values, identity and meaning [4].

While we do not know yet what reconciled museum is, we do know that museums can contribute to the process of reconciliation. It is also recognized that intellectual and political considerations of reconciliation can have profound impact on the theory and practice of democracy around the world (see for instance Kymlicka, W. [56]). We also know that political powers need to recognize that path to forgiveness is necessary, that the memories and associated emotions produced by unjust subjugation endure. Forgiveness, a means for individuals, groups, and cultures to re-gain autonomy, needs to be intertwined with projects for joint futures which inspire and bring people together around shared cultural interests and values [57]. That requires courage and participation from all involved.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, writing—original draft preparation, writing-review and editing, and visualization; V.V and J.A.M.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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